



Cracklescape

Margo Lanagan , Alisa Krasnostein (editor) , Jane Yolen (introduction)

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A presence haunts an old dresser in an inner-city share house. Shining sun-people lure children from their carefree beachside lives. Sheela-na-gigs colonise a middle-aged man's outer and inner worlds. And a girl with a heavy conscience seeks relief in exile on the Treeless Plain.

These stories from four-time World Fantasy Award winner Margo Lanagan are all set in Australia, a myth-soaked landscape both stubbornly inscrutable and crisscrossed by interlopers' dreamings. Explore four littoral and liminal worlds, a-crackle with fears and possibilities.

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From Reader Review Cracklescape for online ebook

Jane says

I love Margo Lanagan's writing so much. I love her brutal skewering of human failings, and her sympathy for those failings. I love the unflinching way she rolls out a story like *Bajazzled*, refusing to let you look away until she's wrung every last drop out of it. I love the way she mingles everyday life and the fantastical – a howling otherworldly feminist cult on a Countrylink train trip to the coast, a thong fallen to the ground as a child flies away, another thong left by a tragic beachside wall, a hard-rubbish dresser in a share-house which holds a ghost who is just another run-of-the-mill person. I love that even when things have gone horribly wrong two sisters can give each other shit. And I hope that a girl running away to the desert will be picked up and dropped back just in time to avert disaster.

Katharine (Ventureadlaxre) says

Cracklescape is the seventh book in the Twelve Planets series, released by Twelfth Planet Press, which showcase the talent of female Australian authors. There is now to be a thirteenth in the series, but that's a review for another time. The brief given to authors was to write 4 short stories of up to 40,000 words in total. The stories could be separate, discrete narratives or linked through character, setting or theme.

This collection contains four short stories that are connected by how the creepy and fantastic sometimes can be lurking just below the surface. Like Harry Potter caught our imagination and wonder with the idea of being just behind a brick wall if you know the right order to tap or the right word to say, in Lanagan's collection we see the ordinary turned extraordinary. Margo Lanagan is the writer where if someone says they think fantasy or horror or whatever is 'always the same' or not for them, give them her writing and she'll soon show them what the genre has to offer. So dependable!

The Duchess Dresser

A dresser found on the side of the road seems like it'll be ideal to turn a bachelor pad into something a little more liveable. Tanner loves it even when everyone else thinks it's ugly - something like a grandmother would have. He sets it in his room and tries it out, but whatever he tries there's one drawer he just can't wriggle open. The strange thing is, it vibrates hard and long enough that the handle almost vibrates enough to just become a blur.

The dresser infects Tanner's life. He has strange dreams (or are they dreams?) of hair over his face, of cohabiting the same space as another body. The body takes form into an old-fashioned female, and he knows the pain of stays and bobbypins, of a weary life. When he catches a flu from work and is bedridden for three days, he knows the pain she's going through seemingly at the same time - but it isn't until a flatmate confirms the same that he realises that his ghost may truly exist.

This piece is comforting in how real it is - the housemates who like and dislike elements of each other, but also come through to help and discuss where needed. The real world elements of girlfriends and jobs... and then the ending was reassuring as well. I really liked the friendship between Tanner and Stella and how this one worked out.

Isles of the Sun

A boy playing on the sand is interrupted by strange golden people, thin and all knowing, and his life is changed forever. Suddenly he understands a higher purpose, and throws away the ties to our common world - forsakes the life he could have had on earth with the girl next door, growing up with his loving parents and so on.

He spreads the information to other children around him, and they're all inspired with the golden light and knowledge of what their life could mean now. They eat less so they are able to perform better on the day they'll leave for their new life, and they re-adjust other elements of their life also.

This was a strange and haunting tale, as we see part of the story told from the boy's mother, who witnesses part of the situation. There are elements of the tale that reminds me of the fervour we hear of with cult mass-suicides, which is worrying. The uplifting of the children is curious as we are left open to interpretation. And it all works very, very well.

Bajazzle

We start with a couple who have possibly been together too long - a dislikable man, and we only see his partner through his eyes, so don't quite get too enamoured with her either. They're on the train because he seems to have lost his licence due to a road rage incident, and it's there that we meet the Sheelas, who are possible urban style witches. The deeply misogynistic man who takes out his anger against the world and what his life has become on the women around him, takes part in a poorly thought out activity when he should have been at a party. (Well, really, he should have been somewhere taking a good hard long look at himself and getting his life on track but that was never going to happen...)

This was one of the stranger ones. It's uncomfortable to read, and overall just a bit sad for the poor couple we're introduced to. None of the characters are in any way likable, which is made good when the man gets his comeuppance in a fairly graphic way.

Significant Dust

This one tells of a girl who's escaping her past in a tiny rural town, unsure of what she's going to do in the future but happy to work that out later and just focus on saving some money for now. One thing about many rural towns in Australia is that they're often plagued by UFOs and other mysterious beings.

This one's a slow burn, and like the previous story the less said about it the better, as it all crashes and dawns over you as you read. I will say that I think saying 'well, you've got that to look forward to' is the perfect thing to say to someone who seems to be a time traveller freaking out about the time they've found themselves in. Certainly settles a person!

This piece and the whole collection are highly accomplished, and very, very well handled as a whole.

Marg says

I am a big fan of the Twelve Planets series that is currently being published by Australian small press Twelve Planets Press. I look forward to each instalment but I must confess that this particularly instalment was one

that I was anticipating more than most! And, of course, given that it is Margo Lanagan telling us short stories, I wasn't disappointed!

The collection opens with The Duchess Dresser. A young man picks up a duchess dresser from the side of the road and decides it will be the perfect piece of furniture for his room in the share house he lives in. The only thing wrong with it is that the drawer doesn't open.... oh and that same drawer rattles and shakes all night, and then there is the spectre of a young woman that seems to call it home. What I thought was interesting about this story is that while the story goes in a certain direction the reader is kind of lulled into thinking they know what is going on until suddenly it ends up somewhere differently but it still makes sense! Then again, that is pretty much trademark Lanagan and I should know that by now!

To read more head to

<http://www.theintrepidreader.com/2012...>

Barry King says

I was trying to figure out what it is about these stories that are so similar. I think it's a presence in the moment. They all have an intense veracity, of attachment to the protagonists, making them and the stories "real". There is no sense of otherness at all, despite how strange they are, in fact, as views of reality.

Which is a rather pathetic way of describing four very good stories wrapped up in a small packet that I would recommend highly, especially to writers of short stories. Not to say "this is how it is done", but the more important "this is what you can do when you really put your mind to it. Now go do it."

I'd give it five stars, but I think there's better to come from Langan, and will be keeping an eye out.

Dearbhla says

Cracklescape is a collection of four short stories by Margo Lanagan. I have no idea what the stories are about but they make for great reading. They hint at things, and the unknown, but they don't have to hunt after the answer to any of the questions they raise, it is enough for them to make you wonder.

I think of them all my favourite was Bajazzle. I loved the Sheela-na-gig reference, and the idea of the Sheelas was just great, although really want to know more about them. And Don, urgh, he was such a dick but at the same time I liked reading about him. His inability to appreciate what he had, his uncomfortableness with other people's needs. And of course, the icky sex.

I reviewed each of the stories on my blog:

The Duchess Dresser - <http://www.susanhateliterature.net/2...>

The Isles of the Sun - <http://www.susanhateliterature.net/2...>

Bajazzle - <http://www.susanhateliterature.net/2...>

Significant Dust - <http://www.susanhateliterature.net/2...>

Maureen says

Margo's stories are always beautifully written. These four were a little different from usual in that they were quite speculative fiction lite (though this didn't stop her being Aurealis nominated last year). Each story is linked by a sense of Australian landscape and of the supernatural.

The Duchess Dresser features a ghost in an old dresser. The Isle of the Sun features golden people in the sky who lure children away. Bajazzled (possibly my favourite for the South Coast setting) involves a creepy ghost succubus and Significant Dust, the possibility of a UFO and alien encounter.

As usual, these stories are rich and deserve multiple rereads. I love the way Margo plays with language and invites the reader to come to their own interpretation of events. Highly recommended collection.

Stephanie says

Cracklescape by Margo Lanagan is the seventh book in the Twelve Planets series of collections published by Twelfth Planet Press.

Knowing that a Margo Lanagan collection was going to be part of the Twelve Planets was, I have to admit, one of the reasons I was initially interested in the series. Lanagan is one of Australia's best writers of short fiction (as her stack of very well-deserved awards testifies), and I knew that she and Twelfth Planet Press were going to create a collection that was something amazing (and I hasten to add that all of the authors involved in the Twelve Planets have also done the same).

For me, Lanagan's short fiction frequently reads something like a fever dream. The conventions of what is "supposed" to make a short story work aren't always there – there aren't always explanations for the strange things happening, and sometimes there are no real conclusions, but Lanagan is so skilled with language and imagery that none of this matters in the least. The stories in Cracklescape fit very much in the fever dream model (albeit fever dreams which may continue to haunt your waking hours).

The collection opens with The Duchess Dresser, in which a man picks up the titular dresser from the side of the road and brings it into his room in the flat he shares. The dresser has a mysterious stuck drawer – a drawer which begins to rattle as odd things begin to happen, all centred around the dresser. There is something both unsettling and poignant about this story. It will make the reader think about the impressions we leave on the world, and what may be seen beneath the surface of things, should you only know how to look.

Isles of the Sun is an extraordinary story (which I wonder-and I'm not sure if I've seen Lanagan talk in an interview about this or not-was inspired by the clip for Sigur Rós's *Glósóli*) which walks the border between this world and another, dreamlike place. Part of Lanagan's skill with writing speculative fiction is the grounding of the fantastic in the real, and this story is an excellent example of this.

Bajazzle is one of my favourites from this collection, giving the reader a glimpse into a strange group of

women (they may be a cult of some kind, but it their presence is shown with essentially no explanation), the Sheelas, inspired by the the sheela-na-gig, a carved female figure seen in churches in Britain and Ireland. The use of the viewpoint character Don, a misogynist who has little respect for his wife, in a story about women reclaiming their feminine power in such a startling fashion, is a brilliant stroke.

The last story in the collection is Significant Dust, which is the most emotionally wrenching of the stories. On the surface, its the story of Vanessa, a girl who's run away from a tragedy, but her story is interwoven with a real supposed UFO encounter. All of the stories in the collection are good, but Significant Dust is extraordinary, and amongst Lanagan's best.

Cracklescape is a brilliant collection by Margo Lanagan, and continues the extremely high quality of the Twelve Planets collections. If you've never read any Margo Lanagan, this is a fine place to start – just be warned that you'll need tissues when reading a good portion of her work, and you'll likely find yourself wanting to devour everything she's written.

Tsana Dolichva says

Cracklescape by Margo Lanagan is one of the more recent releases in the Twelve Planets series from Twelfth Planet Press. I have previously reviewed several collections in the series.

This is only the second Margo Lanagan book I've read and the first containing short stories (the other was Tender Morsels). Although there were only four stories in Cracklescape, I really felt like I got a feeling for the sort of stories Lanagan writes. The general feeling actually reminded me a bit of Ekaterina Sedia's stories, but with an Australian flavour rather than a Russian one (and a bit less depressing).

A few words on the stories in Cracklescape:

The Duchess Dresser is about a dresser (presumably the one on the front cover) with a mysteriously stuck drawer and the man who acquires it and puts it in his bedroom. Suffice to say the drawer isn't stuck here because the key cannot be found.

The Isles of the Sun was a strange story and perhaps my favourite in the collection. It's a somewhat modern world fairytale with a bit of a twist: as well as being told from the main child's point of view, it's also partly told from his mother's point of view. I appreciated the look at the other side of the coin. It's easy to write about the kids that go on an incredible, magical adventure, but what about the parents? Nice to see it addressed in a short story.

Bajazzle was strange. Oddly enough, the references the title evoked for me ended up having more relevance to the story than I expected. Other than that, it's an open-to-interpretation piece and I don't think I can say more about it without saying too much. That and I suspect my reaction to it says as much about me as about the story itself. Heh.

Significant Dust was two stories really. The foreground events in the main character's life — themselves told in two time lines — and the story with the dust and the possible aliens. I think I will need to reread this one when I'm less busy and stressed. I have a feeling there's a bit more to the background story than I picked up

on the first time through.

All in all, this is a strong collection which fans of Lanagan will enjoy. For those who haven't encountered her work before, I recommend it to fans of magical realism, fairy tales sneaking into the real world and magic in everyday places. I'm not the biggest fan of short stories, particularly not in large doses (a definite upside of the slim *Twelve Planets* series), but *Cracklescape* has made me mentally bump *White Time*, another Lanagan collection waiting on one of my shelves, up my TBR.

4 / 5 stars

You can read more of my reviews on my blog.

Laima says

I can't believe it!! I just won this book as a FirstReads giveaway. I think I will go buy a lottery ticket.... this is the book I really really really wanted :)

Dave Versace says

Cracklescape is award-winning fantasist Margo Lanagan's contribution to the *Twelve Planets* series from Twelfth Planet Press. It's a collection of four short stories. The stories are unconnected, though the introduction rightly points out that they are all essentially ghost stories, albeit unusual and diverse examples of them.

'The Duchess Dresser' is a strange tale that seems to be more of a reflection on lifestyle and relationships in inner city apartment dwelling than it is about a piece of haunted antique furniture. The supernatural presence is a puzzle more than a threat, and most of the characters treat it as a mild curiosity when they think of it at all. I found the situation in the story a perfect expression of the routine accommodations that have to be made in living in close proximity with others that – when viewed from the outside – looks inconvenient at best and crazy at worst.

'The Isles of the Sun' is wonderful, a dreamy exaltation of the power of children's imagination on the one hand and a chilling plumb of the depths of parental fear on the other. Alternating perspectives between Elric, a young boy, and then his mother Jenny, Isles has a sense of dreadful inevitability that never quite lets the reader go, even after the point where it seems like it should.

'Bajazzle' is probably my least favourite of the four stories in *Cracklescape* ('Isles' is my favourite, or maybe 'Significant Dust'). It's a solidly told tale, but there's something lurking behind the narrative that I don't quite grasp. In the first half, a boorish middle-aged train commuter's encounter with a group of young women staging an odd protest prompts him to reflect – not to his credit – on his marriage and unsatisfying sex life. In the second half he is served a supernatural comeuppance of a sort. It's an engaging story, but I didn't grok how the two halves fitted together or why the ending happens. The unpleasant sexist pig of a narrator probably didn't help.

Finally, 'Significant Dust' rounds out the collection with, if not a bang, then a remarkably accomplished

piece. It's the story of a young woman who has fled her terrible reputation in her home town. She finds anonymous refuge among the human flotsam who have accumulated at a highway truck stop. There are ghosts and UFOs in the story – well, there might be – but the centrepiece is the slow, merciless revelation of what Vanessa did, its consequences and what she and others sacrificed in order for her to leave. There's a cold horror to the way that the story refuses to end with the tragedy but carries the reader through the aftermath as well. 'Significant Dust' is powerful and accomplished.

I had been getting used to the Twelve Planets series having a strong sense of interconnectedness between the stories, but Cracklescape's stories (like the Kaaron Warren collection) are linked by themes rather than plots. Cracklescape continues the series' impressive run of showcasing the talents of remarkable writers at the height of their powers. I didn't care for a couple of the stories, but there was never a moment reading them that I was not certain that Lanagan knew exactly what she was doing and what she wanted to accomplished. Cracklescape is confident storytelling.

Mark Webb says

This review forms part of my contribution to the Australian Women Writers 2012 Reading Challenge. All my AWWC reviews can be found [here](#).

Cracklescape by Margo Lanagan is one of the Twelve Planets series published by Twelfth Planet Press (12 boutique collections of stories by Australian women writers). It is made up of four shorter stories, including:

- *The Duchess Dresser*
- *The Isles of the Sun*
- *Bajazzle*
- *Significant Dust*

Cracklescape is a beautiful book, with the stylish writing that characterises Lanagan's work. In some ways it is more literary than genre, where exploration of language and elegant passages and phrases are prioritised over plot. Despite its short length, I do not recommend coming to this book for a quick read. More than one of the stories that I read late at night before going to bed I found myself having to read again with a less sleep deprived brain to make sense of it. For this reason more than anything else, I appreciated and admired Cracklescape without loving it.

I recognise that this loses me genre-cred.

The Duchess Dresser tells the story of a share house dweller who finds a duchess dresser by the side of the road. The dresser is cursed/haunted. This opening piece is filled with strong imagery, evoking sadness and quiet desperation with gorgeous prose. I was a little let down by the ending, the story just seemed to peter out.

The Isles of the Sun involves a Pied Piper style engagement of alien/other worldly creatures with a town's children. The ring leading child Elric was particularly well drawn here, with a distinctive voice and an almost cultish vibe to his engagement with the other children. Switching perspective to the mother for the last part of the story was very effective, and there was an ambiguity to the end which I found very appealing.

Bajazzle was an uncomfortable read. The point of view character Don was very unsympathetic. In fact, all of the characters were unsympathetic but yet the story remained engaging. This story had a bit of raunch in it, which was vividly described and quite visceral.

Significant Dust was probably the least genre of the stories, going back to the early 80s to describe a young woman's retreat into a lonely existence working in a roadside diner in the Western Australian outback. The backdrop of the story is a UFO encounter, but the story itself doesn't really have any genre elements. I thought this story was structured very effectively, with interspaced flashbacks that effectively filled in the reason for the lead character's despair.

I've been impressed with the whole Twelve Planets collection so far, and *Cracklescape* is a worthy edition to the series.

Recommended.

I also reviewed this book on my website.

Julia Dvorin says

I picked this collection up at World Fantasy Convention in Toronto back in 2012. I first heard of Margo Lanagan back in 2009 when I attended the World Fantasy Convention in San Jose. At that time, her book *Tender Morsels* won Best Novel in the World Fantasy awards, and I read it and was completely blown away by it. So when I had an opportunity to read something else by Lanagan, I was really excited (even though yes, it took me over a year to finally get to it...you should see my crazy TBR pile, it's a looming threat to my bedside security. Good thing this one was an ebook). This collection is apparently part of a series of other books in the "Twelve Planets" series by Twelfth Planet Press, an Australian publisher of women-friendly speculative fiction--sort like of Hadley Rille Books' down-under counterpart.

Anyway, enough intro, let me tell you about this collection.

There are four unrelated stories here. If anything does unify them, it is perhaps, as Jane Yolen says in the introduction, that they are all about ghosts or some kind of unreal being. But it is also, as Yolen points out, the lush poetry of Lanagan's writing. Like any great poet, Lanagan's language is evocative, perceptive, specific in its details—it is worth reading slowly, on a sentence-by-sentence level (if you can be that patient...sometimes I can't be so I have to go back and read again).

The first story is "The Duchess Dresser", about a young urban flat-dweller who finds his dresser is possessed by a female ghost from a previous era; she possesses him as well, and then appears to his flat-mates. I really liked the set up of the whole story, the gorgeous and vivid descriptions, and the relationships between both the main character and the ghost and the main character and his flat-mates, but ultimately I was frustrated with it because the story felt like it ended far too abruptly and unsatisfyingly. We never found out who the ghost was or why she was there or what ultimately happened to the main character and his flat-mates....for a few minutes there I actually thought I might have gotten an incomplete book, it ended so mid-stream.

The second story is my favorite of the collection: "The Isles of the Sun", about a boy named Elric (no, not of Melniboné) who sees beautiful golden aliens and winds up leading the kids in his small town to follow them to another, lighter, world. I loved Elric's insistence on The end of the story really hit me in a personal way

when it switched point-of-view to the boy's mother, who discovers her son missing early one morning and follows his tracks just in time to watch all the kids seemingly disappear. Though she doesn't encounter the grim disaster she expects, she still loses her child in a way that makes no sense—and Lanagan really made me feel that parental loss and despair and confusion.

The third story, "Bajazzle", is the most "horror"-genre story of the collection, about a self-centered, self-righteous, sexist pig of a man we first encounter on a train with his wife on his way to a beach party. He definitely gets his comeuppance in a very creepy and graphic way when he encounters a succubus at the party, and Lanagan's description of the whole encounter (complete with freaky tikis) is really hard to scrub out of your brain. This story also felt not completely successful to me because the first part (on the train) and the second part (at the party/with the succubus) were so different and didn't seem strongly related enough to me. However, to Lanagan's credit, I was so happy just wallowing in her language and the sheer "ewww" factor of the fantastical elements that I didn't mind.

"Significant Dust", the last story in the collection, was about Vanessa, a young woman out on her own trying to make sense of her life and her traumatic past by living out on the edge of nowhere, and the area 51-like alien encounters that start to happen there. It was my second favorite story, though I felt like it too suffered from a rather abrupt ending just when things started to get interesting. The speculative element was very light in this story, definitely serving as more of an intriguing mysterious background to Vanessa's own unfolding backstory, which was beautifully drawn and compelling.

This is definitely a collection to pick up if you love gorgeous prose with a dash of the fantastical. It definitely made me want to pick up some of Lanagan's other story collections (*Black Juice* won some World Fantasy awards also, apparently). I'm also intrigued to try some of the other Twelve Planets series from Twelfth Planet Press. I'll have to get that TBR pile down to a reasonable level first...nah, why wait for something that'll never happen? ?

A Heroines of Fantasy review

S.B. Wright says

Margo made me cry again with one of her stories in this collection. So yes, I liked it. Like it so much that I saved reading the last story for some six months after buying.

I also love the Twelve Planets range and the cover art of Amanda Rainey. The wasabi green cover of *Cracklescape* is no different, it helps make an impressive alternative rainbow on my bookcase.

But you're here for the stories.

There's four, in line with the brief of the Twelfth Planet Series. They offer a range of what Lanagan is capable off while also being decidedly more grounded in an Australian setting.

The Duchess Dresser is an offbeat ghost story, a great mood piece that I found unsettling but not distressing.

The Isles of the Sun is a tale of magical disappearance told from the point of view of the child experiencing it and the mother left behind.

Bajazzle I'll let you discover for yourself. Witchcraft, an unlikeable but recognizable misogynist protagonist and a whole lot of feeling uncomfortable if you're a bloke.

Significant Dust, a story of escape woven into a tale of a historical reported UFO sighting.

Significant Dust was the story that had me reaching for the tissues. It's not quite so gutting as my favourite Lanagan, Singing My Sister Down, because there's a hopeful ending or at least Margo has left enough room for me to imagine one.

I'd recommend this collection to your Lit friends that think that the fantasy genre is populist and lacking in depth and quality of prose. Margo's one of those writers that you can't pin down, or pigeonhole. A writer who can turn her hand to almost anything and make it her own.

Melina says

Another of the Twelve Planets series, like Love and Romanpunk, this book contains four short stories. Unlike Love and Romanpunk, though, which had a clear storyline thread through the four books, the thing that connects the stories in Cracklescape is more fleeting and indescribable – a bit ghostly.

The first story, The Duchess Dresser, is a story about a share house and the ghost that is invited in when Tan brings home a dresser with a mysteriously locked drawer. Tan and the other members of the household are curious but accepting of the dresser, and the woman who seems to live among them, particularly in their sleep. The Isle of Suns, which is probably my favourite story is about a group of children who set off, Pied Piper style, lured by tall and thin and golden people. The third story, Bajazzle introduces Sheelas and a deeply unlikable main character and is better read than reviewed. The last story, Significant Dust, slips back and forward between times, as Vanessa runs from the ghosts of her past.

Margo Lanagan's writing is like poetry – even if you're not exactly sure what's going on in the story (and at times I definitely felt like this – it's been great thinking it over for a couple of days) you're carried away by the pure beauty of the words. Her characters feel very real, like people you should know, even if they're ghosts who reside in a locked drawer. A lot of people talk about the genre bending quality of the author's work and I can understand that – this is a very accessible collection of stories, even if speculative fiction isn't really your thing. It wouldn't be out of place with a literary collection of short stories.

I thoroughly enjoyed these, and am both happy and sad that I've completed two of the Twelve Planets books – as much as I want to read them, I always want more there to read!

This review originally appeared at Adventures of a Subversive Reader

Arielle Walker says

This tiny collection is absolutely glorious. Set in dusty, gritty, sun-drenched Australia, the characters are haunted by pasts both their own and not their own, encountering phantoms that - even to this weary-of-

ghost-stories reader - feel at once ancient and entirely new.

A particular standout for its incredibly vivid, dark tone, *Bajazzled*, involves a man haunted and hunted by sheela-na-gig figures, the line between real and unreal blurred to indistinguishable. On the other hand, the previous story is glowing warm and purely lovely, childhood nostalgia as it could be if dreams and magic truly did come to life.

The contrasts are startling, the book itself is covetable, so tiny, so easy to slip in a bag and read surreptitiously wherever you like. As the best fantasy does, *Cracklescape* leads the way into other worlds but never lets you get too comfortable there. Highly recommended.
