

International Report from France

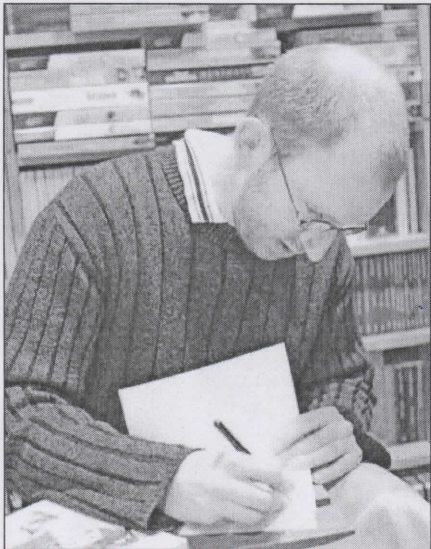
On Saturday March 19 the Librairie Scylla (the only SF bookstore in Paris, or indeed northern France) threw open its doors to authors Léo Henry, Jacques Barbéri, Jacques Mucchielli, and their fans. The doors did not have to open very wide, since the group never numbered more than 25 people during the three-hour signing event, but the gathering was an amiable and dynamic one.

At the same time, in another part of town, a different sort of event was going on. English-language authors Kelley Armstrong and Patricia Briggs were making an appearance at the offices of the publishing house Bragelonne. It was the last of a four-stop signing tour in France, capitalizing on the recent and rapidly growing enthusiasm for what is called Bit-lit here (paranormal romance to Anglophone world). The signings drew crowds of 500 people at their largest, breaking records for that kind of gathering for a genre author, according to the publisher.

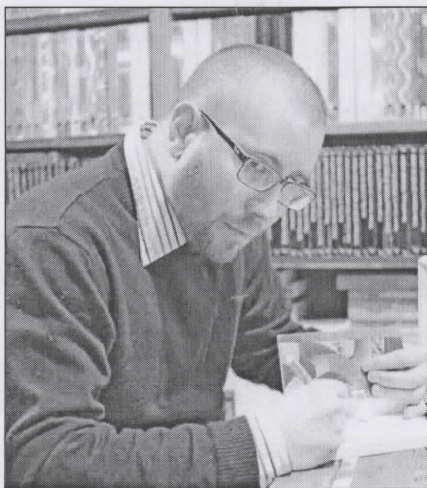
These two simultaneous events provide a telling portrait of the current state of the French SF and fantasy world – both in terms of its writers, and in terms of its fandom. It is a small world, and one in which work in translation, particularly from English, boasts an at times overwhelming presence. It is also starkly polarized. There is a contrast between, on the one hand, an intimate community of dedicated SF readers, well aware of the traditions and classics of the field and interested in the development of new writers whose experimental work is published in small print runs, and, on the other, an enthusiastic, mainstream appetite for fantasy and, more recently, the romance-influenced stories of vampires, werewolves, and their supernatural kin.

This is a tension in the English-speaking world as well, but in France the opposition is more strongly felt. Science fiction has very little presence in the mainstream market, and although the ranks of Bit-lit readers have swelled to massive proportions (a glance at the bestseller stands in any French bookstore demonstrates this), longstanding French science fiction and fantasy enthusiasts draw a firm line between themselves and the followers of this new trend.

SF has a long pedigree in France, with a loyal following since the 1950s, but it has always been a tiny group with rarefied tastes. René-Marc Dolhan, a long-time fan attending the event at Scylla and the head of the readers' association Noosphere.org,



Léo Henry



Jacques Mucchielli

said that science fiction fans here have “more of an intellectual spirit.” They are interested in complicated, experimental stories, and they hold themselves apart from the fantasy movement that has appeared in French mainstream during the last 10 years.

Although English-language authors and trends cast a long shadow over the field, there is a tradition of native French science fiction, which has its own distinctive traits. For example, the work of Philip K. Dick had a profound influence on French science fiction writers, possibly more even than it did in the US or Britain. Ask any French science fiction aficionado who the most influential imports have been, and the odds are he will cite Dick. In contrast, the work of Robert Heinlein is hardly known in France and the pulp tradition has had scant influence.

Nowadays, some claim French science fiction fans are disappearing. Dolhan said the group of pure SF enthusiasts probably numbers no more than 100. Xavier Vernet, the proprietor of Librairie Scylla, said that he has a clientele of perhaps 300 people, most of whom discovered him because they were already dedicated readers, rather than newcomers to the genre. Jean-Daniel Brèque, a translator and editor who has worked in the field since the late '70s, opined that “French SF fans – in the traditional sense – are an endangered species.”

Despite this pessimism, there is growth to be seen, albeit in new directions. Brèque said that fandom is evolving: “What is emerging as a strong force is a group of small entrepreneurs (small-press publishing houses, game designers, websites, and so on), who are very active and creative, but they don't come from the traditional fannish circles, and make for a very different subculture.”

Scylla itself, despite the small scale of its business, is in the process of expansion. Vernet is planning to open a second store in Paris in June, to be called Charybdis. It will stock books from a wider range of genres, and he hopes that it will not only attract a broader readership, but will be a way for readers of other kinds of books to discover SF.

Development in the community dovetails with developments in genre writing itself. Recently, a powerful trend in French SF has been the growth

of *transfiction* or *fiction interstitial*. This is work that straddles the border between genre and general fiction. Parallels in the Anglophone world would be Thomas Pynchon or Michael Chabon. Laurent Queyssi, another professional translator and sometime writer, said that the authors in the field “are moving more into the margins, mixing their work with general literature styles, or combining different genres.”

Some old-time fans, like Dolhan, do not accept the new *interstitial* writers as producers of proper SF, but (that question aside) it is clear that whatever new life is flowing through the field comes from young authors like Frédéric Jaccard and Léo Henry. Henry was one of those present at the Scylla event, and the people who had come to buy his books and have them signed were a young and enthusiastic group, who cheerfully crowded into the small bookstore.

Neither Henry nor Jacques Mucchielli, his co-author for the novels *Yama Loka Terminus* and *Bara Yogoï*, want to identify themselves as either just SF or straight literary authors. Mucchielli said, “I try to write the best that I can, with the tools that are available to me. Beyond that, if you will, I'm not a ‘pure’ SF author. I don't think it is the category that the author fits into that is the most important thing, but the effort to create the best work.” Nevertheless, both acknowledged long involvement with genre fiction, and a knowledge of both French and English-language SF writers.

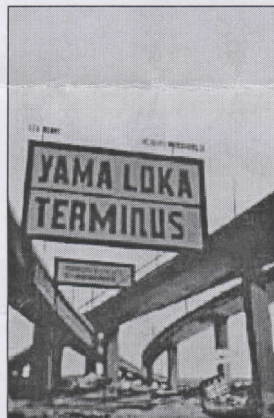
Besides its genre-bending tendencies, the new movement within French SF is characterized by a strong interconnection between readers and writers, and a commitment to small-press and limited-run editions. Henry said that he was in frequent touch with a loyal fan group, mostly online. In addition to his bookstore, Vernet has created a non-profit organization, called Dystopia, with fellow fans Olivier Tréneleules and Clément Bourgoïn that promotes works by new authors. Supported by private donations, they publish small print runs of works that would have trouble finding their place at a traditional publisher because of the lack of commercial appeal.

Fiction interstitial has had some commercial successes as well, as the careers of Catherine Dufour,

Fabrice Colin, Frank Jacobowsky, Pierre Bordage, and a handful of others show. However, the books that have become more widely popular tend to be those that blend science fiction with a more fantasy-influenced style. Simon Bréant, a recent graduate of the Sorbonne in Paris who wrote his doctoral thesis on French SF, explained that this trend makes sense in terms of historical patterns:

“Science [fiction] that was really down to earth, in a way (even through it was in space), didn't really make it here in France. My only explanation would be that science, in and of itself, was not what interested readers of the time. Some of them, of course, and some of the people that became science fiction writers, were into that kind of thing. But the science itself is not that important. It's more the possibilities of science, and the effects of science that is interesting to readers, and it had continued to right now. I would say that when a science fiction book is well written and contains huge pieces of science, it won't really work in France. It will be read, but only by a small group. One good example

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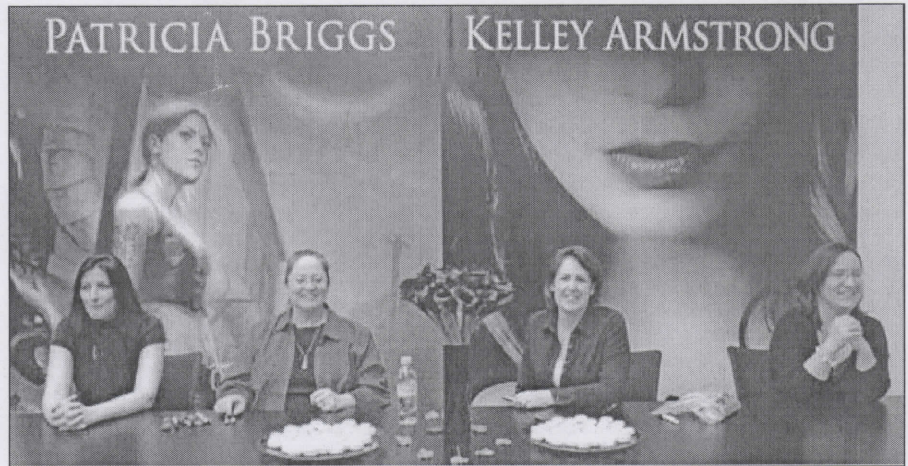
of that is Greg Egan, because right now he is seen as a very important and very original writer in France, but his books don't really sell, to the point that it is less and less possible to publish him in France, even though it's very important. I would say that what doesn't work in France concerning Greg Egan, and all that kind of pure, abstract science, is that readers, most of the time, prefer the sense of wonder that comes from huge exploding stars and things like that.

"Pierre Bordage would be an example of a more *Star Wars*-like science fiction. There are a lot of debates going on about that, but I would say it's in a science fiction setting. Most readers don't want to have science and technology explained to them. They just want effects. They want something that works, and that has impact on them. In the books, you see only the surface of things. Explanations don't really help the writer. Even an author like Laurent Genefort, who is straining to do hard fiction, his books mostly look like hard science, in the sense that there are scientists who are in the foreground and things are only supposed to happen on a logical basis, but still, he never really explains anything. He likes to use Big Dumb Objects, things like that. And it works – it's impressive; I like what he's doing, but it's not hard science fiction."

The other side of the tendency toward the fantastic in French SF is that fantasy itself has become very big in France. This is a relatively recent development, since fantasy did not become a recognized genre in France when it took off in America and England during the '70s and '80s. It has grown during the past ten years, first with the spread of Big Commercial Fantasy and more recently with the Bit-lit vogue.

The publisher Bragelonne is both architect and beneficiary of this growth. Stephan Marsan, their director of publishing, described the work the company did both to publicize the idea of a fantasy genre and to bring the field more directly to the reading public. They have divided their energies between promoting new authors and raising the profile of recognized landmarks of the field. After the company's founding in 2000, Bragelonne released new translations of books like Terry Brook's *Shannara* series and Ray Feist's novels, making them more widely available in France. "We wanted to provide the readers with an itinerary, a route, of the big steps you need to go through when you want to go through the genre," Marsan said. "If you just read *Harry Potter*, you won't go immediately to the most cutting edge, complex urban fantasy. We could do all this work to open up the market, because we already knew that there were good signs. We already knew that there was a demand, that there was a new generation of readers that read fantasy as *bande dessinée* [graphic novels, which are hugely popular in France], video games, and all. There was a seed."

Although authors in translation make up 190 of their 200-author list, Marsan said that Bragelonne is committed to devoting a disproportionate amount of energy to promoting their minority of French authors, and have had commercial and critical success with several, most notably Henri



Translator Lorène Lenoir, Patricia Briggs, Kelley Armstrong, translator Isabelle Pernot

Loevenbruck and Pierre Pavel. At this point, there are no French-language Bit-lit writers on the scene, but Bragelonne has a couple of series ready to roll out next year. They started publishing Kim Harrison and Kelley Armstrong in 2006, so it has taken six years to get to the point where French authors are publishing within the subgenre.

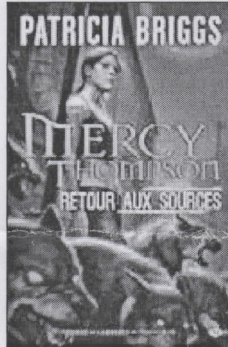
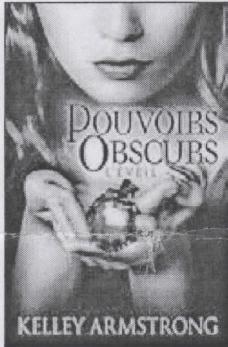
Marsan said that it is not easy to find new genre authors in France. "It's a question of culture, because we don't have any creative writing seminars in France. There's still a very strong mind-set here that literature is sacred; it's not something you learn; it's not a craft. Wrong! Very wrong, in our opinion. But, it's still the very *esprit français*. But that makes it very difficult for them [the authors] to get advice, to get read by their peers."

However, he then mentioned the appearance of the new website *cocyclics.org* as a sign that that mindset is losing power. *Cocyclics* is an online writers group of sorts – where you can comment on other people's writing if you submit your own. So far, it is the only one of its kind in France, but it already has almost 100 members. It serves a new purpose in France, because it can give a stamp of legitimacy to a work that has been through a feedback and rewriting cycle. This is a significant development in a writing culture like France where

there are no agents to discover, vet, or act as a pre-editing filter for writers. "I think it's going to make the submissions better, but also help the authors know more about the industry and the business."

Marsan also said that the new success of fantasy has encouraged a growth of French fandom in new directions. Fantasy, and now Bit-lit, are attracting more women, and younger readers, and are creating a community where none existed before. "In comparison [to science fiction], there never was any fantasy fandom. There were fans, there were roleplaying gamers, but they never called themselves fandom, and they never acted like it. It took my going to Worldcon in Montreal to really discover what fandom was. It's a kind of freemasonry. Try to find a thousand people working for no money to try to organize a convention in France. I will not see that in my lifetime. Ever. What's new is that I think something like a fandom is appearing for Bit-lit – with blogs, with forums, with websites, people doing fanzines online." There were 500 people at the signing for Patricia Briggs and Kelley Armstrong. "I've never seen that before. And it will certainly never happen for a fantasy writer. I think the biggest one was for David Gemmel, a few years ago, and there were 300 people, which was huge. But what happened here last week with the Bit-lit authors was much more spontaneous, younger people, lots of girls. They are taking hold of the Bit-lit movement. They gather together; they make friends. It was a four-hour improvised convention. That shows how strong and willing and enthusiastic these people are, and I think it's the beginning of something extremely important."

—Chloe Smith ■



French fans line up for the Briggs and Armstrong signing