

Parsec April 2004 Meeting

Date and Time: April 10th 2004, 2 PM (Although members tend to gather early.)
Topic: Dan Bloch on "The History of Tall Buildings from the Pyramids to 2010."
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library (Directions on page 11.)



Tentative Meeting Schedule

May 2004

Date: May 8th, 2004
Topic: TBA
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

June 2004

Date: June 12th, 2004
Topic: TBA
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

Cover Art by Diana Harlan Stein

PARSEC

Pittsburgh Area's Premiere Science-Fiction Organization
P.O. Box 3681, Pittsburgh, PA 15230-3681

President - Kevin Geiselman Vice President - Kevin Hayes
Treasurer - Greg Armstrong Secretary - Bill Covert
Commentator - Ann Cecil
Website: trfn.clpgh.org/parsec

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

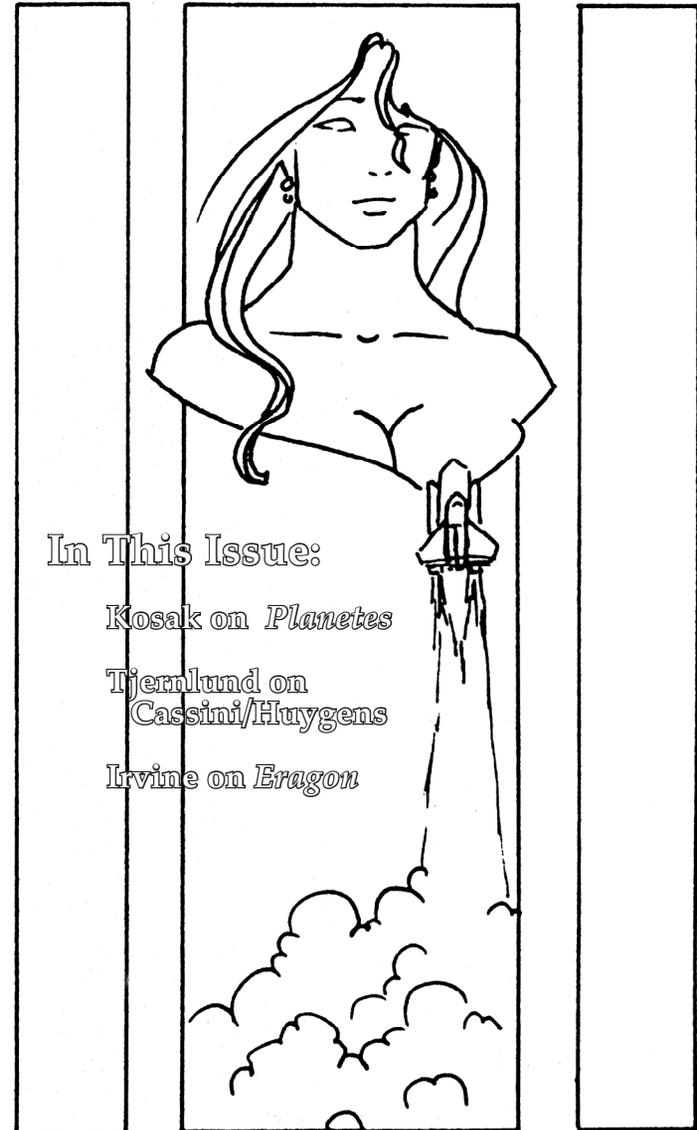
Dues: \$10 full member, \$2 Supporting member

Sigma is edited by David Brody
Send article submissions to: sigma@spellcaster.org



SIGMA

The Newsletter of PARSEC • April 2004 • Issue 217



In This Issue:

Kosak on *Planetes*

Tjernlund on
Cassini/Huygens

Irvine on *Eragon*



View From the Outside

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

Last month, I attended the Tekkoshoccon anime convention. It was much like the previous year with plenty of DVD's and manga in the dealer's room, computer games, video rooms ("Full Metal Panic? Fumoffu" was absolutely hysterical), panels, artists and cosplayers. I was there for a few hours before I realized something was missing.

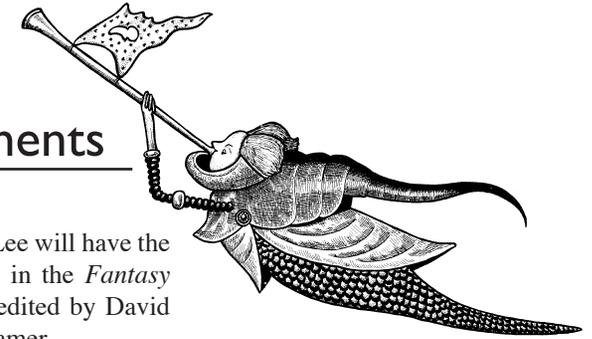
It was me. Last year I went in my Klingon gear and fit right in. Sure, there was the odd person who asked "What's a Klingon got to do with anime" to which I would reply (in a loud, Klingonesque voice and with theatrical gestures) "What! Aren't Klingons allowed to like anime, too?" I wouldn't say I was the center of attention but I was noticed. I even got my picture in Animerica magazine.

This year, I was just another otaku in the crowd. It wasn't until the kaiju panel that I was once again able to exert my knowledge and personality. I was even recognized there as "the Klingon from last year." But that wasn't enough.

Andy Warhol said that everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes and, while I'm not sure I'm well known enough to qualify as "famous" I admit that I have gotten somewhat addicted to the attention I get when I am playing the Klingon. People ask to take my picture or have their picture taken with me. People give me plenty of room when I come down the hallway. I get my photo in the paper, interviews on TV. I'm invited to parties. I was on panels at WorldCon! Walking the con hallways in jeans and a t-shirt, I am jealous of my Klingon side, who is now laughing at me derisively for being bored and lonely in a hotel full of people.

We all crave that attention and despite Warhol's promise the vast majority of us will go through our entire lives as anonymous faces in the crowd. But even though the crowd has continued to grow, so have our opportunities to reach for that spotlight. The Internet is one such venue where, no matter what your talent or relevance to society, you can put up a website to show yourself off. Web logs (blogs) allow you to ramble on and on about any topic you choose and, whether it's insightful or inane, someone will read it. Of course, a web cam and a willingness to get naked is a sure path to attention.

And, while Asimov's, Analog and a plethora of other publications might not print your story, what do they know? The guys from World Association Publishers were going to be at the April meeting to talk about self-publishing. However, at the last minute they called it off so you are going to have to just suffer in anonymity until that can be rescheduled. That's the price we pay for living in an uncaring universe.



Announcements

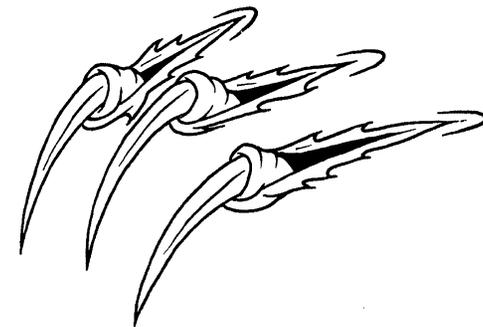
• PARSEC's Mary Soon Lee will have the story, "Shen's Daughter" in the *Fantasy Best of 2003* collection, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Kramer

• Larry Ivkovich made his first print sale, the short story "Casual Day", to the Canadian fiction magazine, *StoryTeller*.

Directions to the Parsec Meeting Site

The East Liberty Branch of the Carnegie Library is at 130 S. Whitfield Street in East Liberty. (N40 27.622 W79 55.573) By public transportation, take the 77A, 77B, 86A or 86B to the stop at Penn and Whitfield and walk a block south. Take a 71B or 71C to Centre and Highland and walk north and then left onto Baum Blvd. From the East Busway Station at East Liberty, walk west on Penn Circle for two blocks, turn right onto Highland for 1/2 block then left onto Baum.

From Downtown you can take Penn Avenue to East Liberty. Turn right onto S. Beatty and find a place to park. Or take Baum Blvd. from town until you can turn left onto S. Beatty to park. From Oakland, take 5th Avenue to Highland. Cross Penn and then turn left onto Baum. Past the fountain and park behind the library. From the North, get on Route 28 and cross the 40th Street Bridge then up the hill to turn left onto Penn Avenue. From East and the Parkway East, get off at Wilkinsburg onto Ardmore. This turns into Penn which you can follow through East Liberty and then left onto S. Beatty.



and he really doesn't know what advice an older man might really give.

The author's bio tells us that he grew up reading Science Fiction and Fantasy novels and decided to write his own. And that's the other big problem. Paolini is obviously copying his sources, and from the plot outline above, you can probably guess what they are. The book is basically *Star Wars* meets *Lord of the Rings*, with a little bit of *Dragon Riders of Pern* thrown in. I did have some fun picking out the influences as I read ("There's the Gandalf character...those guys are orcs...yep, that's Darth Vader...oh, here comes Yoda..."), but basically, *Eragon* is a good example of why, if you want to write good fantasy, you need to read a lot more than just fantasy.

Paolini does show promise. He does have some interesting ideas, particularly in designing the pieces of his world (the city built inside an extinct volcano is intriguing.) Someday he may be a good writer. I just wish that having written this book, he had stuck it in a drawer somewhere for 10 years or so, and then come back to it. Failing that, I wish that his publisher had not been in such a big hurry to cash in on the *Lord of the Rings* craze and had assigned Paolini a really ruthless editor to whip this baby into shape.

On the other hand, *Summerland* is good in all the ways *Eragon* is not.

It is well written and polished, original, and exciting. Chabon's style is engaging; the story flows smoothly, the characters, whether they are 11 year-old kids or centuries old men, or tricksters as old as time, are all well fleshed out and believable.

The story starts with Ethan Feld and his father, who have just moved to a small island off the coast of Washington state, where baseball is the main summer passion. Unfortunately, Ethan is just about the worst baseball player in the world. He hates the game, but his Dad won't let him quit. But then Ethan meets Ringfinger Brown, a scout who recruits heroes (and who, incidentally played ball for a season with the old Homestead Grays.) Unfortunately, Ethan is recruited a little too late, showing up in the Summerlands just in time to see the guys he was supposed to help go down in defeat. Seems like the adventure is over, but then a henchman of the mysterious Coyote kidnaps Mr. Feld, and Ethan and his friends have to ride to the rescue. They quickly discover that their quest is more serious than a simple rescue.

Our world, the Middlings, is only one of four worlds – the others being the Summerlands, the Winterlands, and the Gleaming – which are, in turn branches of the world tree. Coyote has decided to kill the world tree and bring on Ragged Rock, the end of all existence, and Ethan's Dad holds the key to his plans. Coyote is also the inventor of baseball, a game which has an important place in the four worlds, and is bound by powerful magics. And so the quest to save Ethan's Dad and all existence involves putting together a rather motley baseball team (Big Chief Cinquefoil's Traveling Shadowtails All-Star Baseball Club) and playing a lot of very strange baseball.

And that does not even hint at the riches in the book. Chabon draws heav-



Notes from the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Column - David Brody

This month I'd like to write about lying. Now, I'd be lying if I said that my topic this month had a whole lot to do with SF and fantasy, but this is my column and I reserve the right to occasionally wander where my whimsey (or anger) leads me.

Actually, I may not be straying very far. Isn't SF the literature of deception - elaborate hoaxes that purport to take us to other dimensions or distant planets? We buy into these lies because, in some perverse and wonderful way, they enrich and educate us.

Unfortunately, the lies of the real world rarely stand for anything positive. They are generally petty and self serving, and far too often they come from the top, from those that owe us the truth as an ethical imperative.

In this election year the truth is under assault more than ever. Members of our government, blinded by their addiction to power, have begun to bombard the airwaves with ads that not only distort the truth (a time honoured tradition in American politics), but dispense with it completely.

Of course, this is all about creating fear.

Fear makes us wary of change. Fear makes us stand with those that shout the loudest and carry the biggest gun. Fear makes us support wars that do nothing but destroy and kill. And usually, fear makes us unsafe. 200 Spaniards would be alive today, if our government hadn't lied to us about the threat from Iraq, and had instead pursued Al Qaeda vigorously.

After all, as Frank Herbert reminded us, fear is the mind-killer. And lies are the best way to create fear.

OK, enough of my ranting.

In this issue, Diane Harlan Stein contributes our first original cover artwork, Alan Irvine reviews whiz kid Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* and Wendy Kosak (otherwise known as John W. Campbell Award winner Wen Spencer) reviews the Japanese manga, *Planetes*. Also, Henry Tjernlund looks at the space probe Cassini's trip to Saturn and our fearless leader Kevin Geiselman muses on his life as a Klingon.

Hey, is Geis going to dress up that way at Confluence? What ever happened to the dignity of the office of President. Oops! I guess that went right out the door in 2000. Geis, as far as I'm concerned you can dress any way you want, just don't start any unnecessary wars. I've had enough of that.

Peace.

Continued from Page 2

As for me, in spite of the time and effort involved, when next year's Tekkoshoon rolls around again I'm going to be putting on the make-up and spiky boots to be a Klingon at the con. Cat-girls love the ridges.

Continued from Page 8

- 10 - Designing Aliens Workshops (with materials at cost). Panel discussion, then artist workshop.
- 11 - Tyranny of choice.
- 12 - Leader selection in sci-fi and fantasy stories. [Kids Programming-Sim City.]
- 13 - My Jeep's Gone AWOL, sir.
- 14 - Romantic Above Ground- when you have enough robust sex, why do you need physics? Why are you reading this anyway?
- 15 - Future Politics- past retreads is this what makes New Space Opera Different.
- 16 - Who influenced you? 40's – present.
- 17 - Cross cultural sci-fi, reading and understanding the stories.
- 18 - The Best Short Stories that nobody ever reads anymore. 5000 words that shook the world.
- 19 - Editing fairly. Bowdlerizing SF for a modern market.
- 20 - Boston Worldcon, will Phil really dance naked?
- 21 - The rise of fanfic, will it ever become respectable?
- 22 - Has the age of the cooperative novel arrived? (Internet)
- 23 - Plots in video games. Everybody expects one but nobody expects a good one.
- 24 - Final Fantasy- taking the place of fiction –Why? Because of its interaction because of movie content? Spaced?
- 25 - Has SF play dried up? Was it ever there? Was RUR an anomaly?
- 26 - SF movies from book- Why are the Asimov ones so bad?
- 27 - Is there still a humorous vein in SF and fantasy? Besides Pratchett? Beyond Anthony?
- 28 - Judging the cover by the book.
- 29 - What is making new SF and fantasy art new and original?
- 30 - How does one come up with, or are tropes in SF? Variation- 4 basic conflicts being expanded: Man vs Man, Man vs Nature/God, Man vs Tech/God and Man vs himself/God

The meeting concluded at about 4:30pm. After the meeting, 24 members converged at the Sharp Edge for a pleasant meal and a few beers.

Minutes taken by Sasha Riley.



Books

Eragon

by
Christopher Paolini
&

Summerland

by
Michael Chabon
reviewed by Alan Irvine

I read these books back to back, which proved an interesting experience, for they played off of each other in unexpected ways. *Eragon* disappointed me, then *Summerland* came in and delighted me, providing everything that was missing in *Eragon* and more.

Eragon is the fantasy novel (first of a trilogy, of course) that has garnered all sorts of attention and hype because it is the phenomenal bestseller written by a 17 year-old author. But guess what? It reads like it was written by a 17 year-old. (That is not meant as a slam against young writers, but an acknowledgement that it takes a lot of practice, experience, and time to become a good writer. In fact, I'll make the comment more pointed and personal. *Eragon* reads like the novels I wrote when I was 17 years old.)

Young Eragon is hunting in the mountains when a strange rock falls out of the sky. The rock turns out to be a dragon's egg. When the dragon hatches and bonds with Eragon, his life changes forever. He is thrust into a world of power, treachery, and politics.

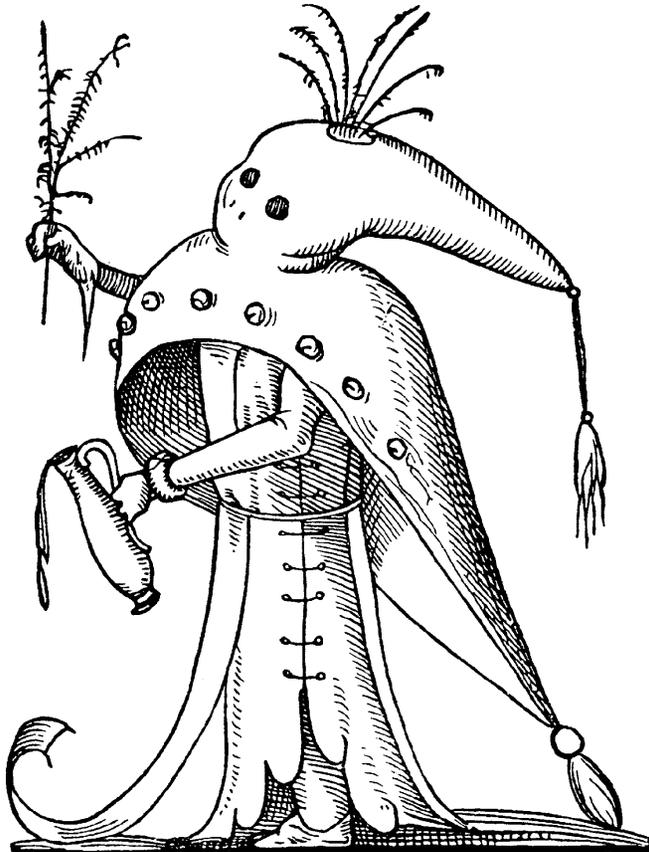
Dragon-riders once defended the empire, keeping the peace, and ensuring justice. One rider, however, turned on the others and slew them all, save for a few who joined his cause, and then declared himself emperor. The empire is now under assault from a dedicated band of rebels. A new dragon and rider, Eragon and his dragon Saphira, have appeared, and the emperor has sent powerful, magical beings to find them and bring them into the emperor's service. Fortunately, a mysterious old man, who seems to know an awful lot about dragons, sword fighting, and magic, takes Eragon under his wing to train him and bring him safely to the rebel forces.

It is not a bad novel. In fact, the plot is fairly interesting, and Paolini does come up with some intriguing twists. But, the writing is weak and in need of (lots of) polishing and editing. The characters in particular are often clumsy and wooden, especially when talking. The dialog is at its worst when older characters start to give life advice and guidance to Eragon. Their dialogue is filled with bold, heroic cliches and, well, the sort of canned advice teenagers expect adults to give them. After all, however old the characters are, the author behind them is only 17,

story arc of Hachimaki's struggle to join a Jupiter colonization effort which is a target of a "Mo Mankind in Space" terrorist group.

The first story sets the tone of the manga, opening with Yuri and his wife on a space shuttle. Yuri teases his wife for having a compass in space, and then leaves his seat to use the bathroom. Moments later, a stray piece of garbage punctures his wife's window and she's killed instantly – her body and the compass both lost. Now six years later, he works at clearing the orbit. One day he spots the compass, and risks his life to retrieve it. He has a near-death experience where he sees his wife. When he gains consciousness, he finds that the compass has "Please save Yuri" written on the back. Between the two, he finds peace.

Life is gritty and real, with great respect for true science. The characters struggle to find truth in a world filled with gray zones. I fully recommend this series. This series was also made into an anime which I saw at Lunacon, which is also excellent. I think currently it was only fan-subbed, but hopefully it will be available in USA soon.



Space Report

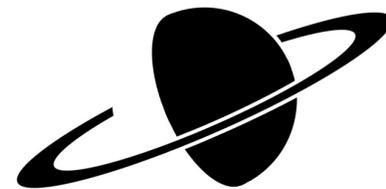
Henry Tjermland

Cassini's Journey to Saturn

Over the next several months the NASA/ESA Cassini/Huygens probe will be making its final approach to Saturn and its system of moons. In the first week of June 2004, Saturn will have a size of a half degree of arc as seen from the Cassini probe. This is about the size of Earth's Moon as seen from Earth. Imagine Saturn the size of the Moon with rings around it and that is what you would witness if you could be coasting alongside of the Cassini spacecraft.

In the second week of June Cassini will make a close flyby of the outer Saturn moon of Phoebe. Phoebe is a small 200-kilometer-diameter moon that was best imaged by Voyager 2 as a fuzzy disk with very poor detail showing. Cassini's images will be a thousand times better. Phoebe is of particular interest because it is in a retrograde orbit around Saturn (which means it orbits in the opposite direction of the primary moons) and is suspected to be a captured Kuiper belt object (KBO). (The Kuiper belt is a super-sized cousin of the Mars-Jupiter asteroid belt and begins at about Neptune's orbit, and extends out to more than three times more distant from the Sun. The Kuiper belt was hypothesized as the source of short period comets, but proven to exist in only the last ten years. Dozens of KBOs have already been found using telescopic means, with the largest so far having an estimated diameter of 1000 kilometers.)

Cassini will make orbital insertion to the Saturn system on July 1st. There it is to spend 4 years observing Saturn and its system of moons. A highly anticipated part of the Cassini mission is the descent of the Huygens probe (expected in December 2004) into the atmosphere of Saturn's largest moon, Titan. At just over 5000 kilometers in diameter, Titan is the solar system's second largest moon and is slightly larger than the planet Mercury. The thick hazy brown atmosphere of Titan contains mostly nitrogen, but also contains small amounts of many hydrocarbon compounds. It is believed that the surface pressure of this atmosphere is up to 50% higher than that of Earth's. This would make Titan second only to Venus for having the thickest atmosphere around a terrestrial body in our solar system.





March Minutes

March 13, 2004.
Confluence Panel Topics

The meeting started at approximately 2 pm. The winner of the raffle choose the Sea Horse Knight print by Robin Wood.

Announcements: May meeting art show, if you want to show off your art. Send an e-mail to Sasha Riley at neo_vero@yahoo.com to let her know what you want to bring, and how long you will need to present your work.

PARSEC voted to put an ad in the program book for April Geiselman's HS musical production of *Anything Goes*

Confluence is fast approaching: please pay for memberships, and book your room. 501-C3 status is the same as the last PARSEC meeting. The non-profit committee is planning a meeting.

Laurie Mann attended the Lord of The Rings Oscar party and she has pictures up on her website at www.dpsinfo.com.

News: PARSEC has been offered a booth at the Three Rivers Arts Festival, at no cost. A group is getting together to work out the details. The June PARSEC meeting may take place at the Arts Festival (on June 12th). The Festival runs Friday June 4, 2004 through the 20th.

Treasurers report: PARSEC made \$35.31 last month.

The topic part of the meeting started at approximately 2:30: Ann Cecil read a list of people who have said they are attending Confluence: William Tenn, Fruma Klass, David Hartwell, Kathryn Cramer, Wen Spencer, Tamora Pierce, Tim Esaias, Alexis Gilliland, Shane Tourtelotte, Charles Oberndorf

Possible Panel Topics:

- 1 - Flash Fiction: Flash of the moment, or a real future.
- 2 - Furrries are coming whether you like it or not.
- 3 - Small presses and their changing mission. Used to be about the 'fresh' stuff. Now it seems to be about reprinting the old stuff.
- 4 - Bending Boundaries.
- 5 - New Weird- Is this the old weird renamed?
- 6 - Anthology Panel. Is everything you write about, the type of story you had in the anthology? How did you get in, how did you work on it, what type of anthologies are easiest to write for? [This is planned to be focused on a specific theme anthology.]
- 7 - Where are or should be NASA's priorities? Ack, NASA!
- 8 - Art extremes. Very small, and very large.
- 9 - Interstitial Art.

ily on mythology and folklore, particularly Norse, Native American, and modern American, and has clearly done his research. Besides obvious choices like Coyote/Loki, Woden, the Big Man with the Axe) there is plenty of less well known material. Part of the fun of the book, if you're versed in folklore, is spotting the source material and seeing how Chabon has transformed it, but it is not necessary to know any of the background to enjoy the book. Ethan and company encounter giants (of many sizes,) fairies (here called ferishers, and with a decidedly nasty streak,) sasquatches, tall tales (the big man with an axe, the river boat gambler,) ghosts, werewolves (and werefoxes and wererats). Beyond this sort of research, Chabon knows the place of baseball in the American mythos, he has obviously read through the novels and stories of baseball as myth and metaphor, from *Mighty Casey* to *The Natural*.

But while Paolini takes his source material pretty much intact, merely fiddling with surface details, Chabon filters his source material through a particular point of view, transforming it into something new. It is folklore and myth and baseball reformed.

Reading *Summerland*, I was reminded a lot of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. *Summerland* covers much of the same ground as *American Gods*, both drawing from the same myth and folklore sources, both building to apocalyptic battles. But *Summerland* is in no way derivative of *American Gods*. If anything, it is a mirror image. Where *American Gods* is brooding, ominous, full of Gaiman's dark fantasy, *Summerland* is whimsical, bright, and fun. It is, well, the summer that compliments *American Gods*' winter. If you liked one, you will like the other.

One final note: for some reason the publisher classifies *Summerland* as a children's novel. Probably because the main heroes are three kids, and because there is no blood and gore; at least that's the only reason I can see.

Eragon is an okay book cashing in on the current Tolkien craze. I will probably read the rest of the trilogy (checking them out of the library rather than investing my money), and hopefully Paolini will improve with experience. But *Summerland* goes on the shelf with the other classics of fantasy, to be reread and recommended and discussed for years to come.

Planetes

by

Makoto Yukimura

Tokyopop Manga

reviewed by Wendy Kosak

This manga is great hard science fiction about the lives of garbage collectors in space. In the near future, we've littered the space around Earth to dangerous levels. Hero, Hachimaki and his fellow crewmembers of the Toy Box, Fee and Yuri, daily put their lives on the line to collect trash orbiting Earth at 8 km. per second. While a collection of stand alone short stories, they build one complete