

Parsec May 2004 Meeting

Date and Time: May 8th 2004, 2 PM (Although members tend to gather early.)
Topic: Kavan Ratnatunga will do a presentation on his friend Arthur C. Clarke.
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library.

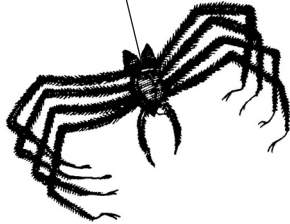
Tentative Meeting Schedule

June 2004

Date: June 12th, 2004
Topic: Sasha's Art Show & Tell.
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library.

July 2004

Date: July 10th, 2004
Topic: TBA
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library.



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.

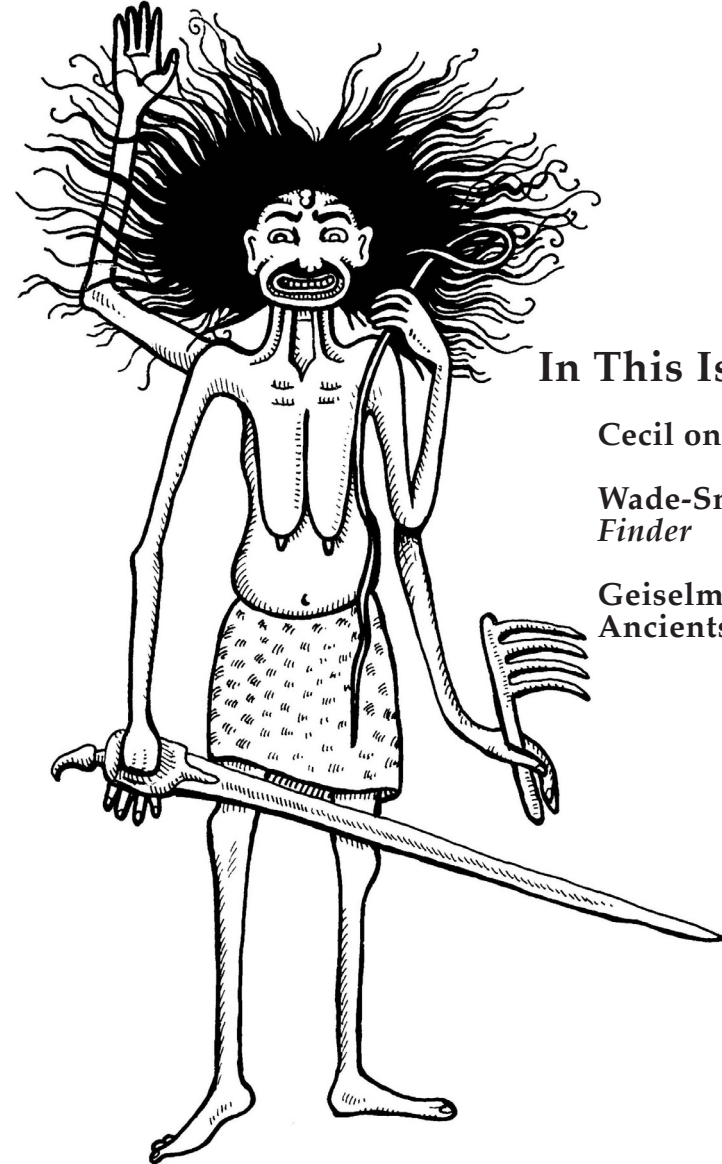
Dues: \$10 full member, \$2 Supporting member

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



SIGMA

The Newsletter of PARSEC • May 2004 • Issue 218



In This Issue:

Cecil on *Janvier*

Wade-Smith on
Finder

Geiselman on the
Ancients



View From the Outside

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

Archeologists in South Africa recently discovered some small shells with holes in them that had been strung into a necklace or bracelet. They had red ochre stains, not from having been painted, but from having been worn by painted people. Clearly, these people thought symbolically. The neat thing is that the shells were worn 75,000 years ago, before the last Ice Age and twice as old as the previous examples.

I think that what I like most about these discoveries is that it points out that ancient people were actually smarter than we give them credit for. We sit here in the 21st Century and think of ourselves as the pinnacle of culture and technology. We forget that there was a lot that was amazing and wonderful in days past. We once thought that the Atlantic was impassable until Columbus sailed for China and got lucky that a continent was in the way. Then we learned that the Vikings actually had colonies in Newfoundland and explored at least as far south as Manhattan 500 years before that. Scholars said, "OK, so the Vikings sailed the Atlantic, but they, surely, were the first. Ancient people simply didn't have the technology". Really? Then how did Egyptian pharaohs get addicted to cocaine? And given that Pennsylvania was already inhabited when the Bearing land bridge was just beginning to thaw, either Siberians sprinted to the East coast or Ice Age Europeans found their way across the Atlantic.

Antarctica was "discovered" in the 1800s but maps drawn 300 years earlier based on even older maps, not only show Antarctica, but also show coastline that hasn't been ice-free for a very long time. Hmmm, our ancient ancestors weren't just stringing beads together, they had ocean-spanning cultures, advanced navigation techniques, and who knows what other surprises.

Kavan Ratnatunga (who will be speaking on Arthur C. Clarke at the upcoming meeting) has on his website details of a stone carving found on Ceylon. Scratched into the rock is a six foot map of the universe with seven concentric circles in the center that represent the seven seas and the world we know. Outside our world are crossed circles that represent the stars. And, to one side, is another set of concentric circles. Another world like our own, perhaps. How wondrous that these ancient people had so sophisticated a worldview that they could conceive of worlds outside our own. Or perhaps they were even smarter than we give them credit for.

Atlantis doesn't sound so far-fetched after all.

Fourth, you state that it is because of our government's "lies" that 200 Spaniards are dead. I find this offensive in the extreme. 200 Spanish men, women, and children are dead because cowardly homicidal terrorists detonated explosives in train stations. Perhaps the terrorist cell decided to kill Spanish civilians because Spain chose to join us in the invasion and occupation of Iraq; perhaps, if the invasion hadn't occurred, the cell would have chosen to use their men, money, and explosives to blow up something else instead. But to shift the blame for the deaths of those people from the murderers to our government is both fallacious and outrageous. You might as well say that the "silence" of the Johnson and Nixon governments in response to Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza makes *those governments* responsible for the Palestinian massacre of the Israeli Olympic team in 1972.

I applaud the new editorship and design of SIGMA; the newsletter looks good and reads well. However, I hope for better editorial discretion and more relevant editorial content in the future. Thanks!

Randy Hoffman

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ror stories might enjoy this book. For *Doctor Who* fans longing for gay content, this book successfully incorporates sexuality into the mostly asexual world of *Doctor Who*. I can't wait to see what the author does for the pending TV series revival.

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The talk covered a variety of structures, including a chart with Pittsburgh's own skyscrapers, and digressed off into deep structures (bore holes in Russia and man-made lakes in Nevada), but was enlightening and entertaining to all.

Ann Cecil

Meetings Galore

This was a busy month. The committee to get PARSEC true non-profit status with the IRS (aka the 501c3 group) met again, and expects to finish by-law rewrites after one more meeting. There will be a general mailing in June to all **paid** members of the new by-laws. These have a really classy mission statement now, crafted by Kevin Hayes, and lots of detail about how things are going to work (mostly there will be lots more opportunities for everyone to be an officer and do work for the organization). [oh, wasn't that good news?]

PARSEC is going to have a booth at the Three Rivers Arts Festival. The big one, downtown, yes, for real! The committee to get it organized had its first meeting already. We will have a tent, and try to feature our activities: One tent wall for Confluence, one for Alpha, one for Monthly Meetings and SIGMA. We want to have readings of poetry and flash fiction, particularly from by the authors with short stories in *Triangulations*. We plan to bring a section of the art panels, so the craftier of us can display their work (for sale even) – but remember, it has to be work we can take down quickly when it rains. The booth will be up for the last 3 days of the Festival: the 18th, 19th, and 20th of June. Volunteers will be welcome; contact Geis (current PARSEC President), David Brody (current SIGMA editor), or Ann Cecil (current over-volunteered commentator).

Graveyard Dust takes on voodoo, with a very positive slant. Marie Laveau, the renowned Voodoo priestess, is a character in the book, as is January's sister. While the mystery is a little thinner in this book - it's clear that the 'murder' of which January's sister is accused never happened, and something entirely else is going on - we get lots of atmosphere and several stunning rituals.

Sold Down the River puts January in a position to experience the full brunt of slavery at its worst. The mystery involves a foul, unlikeable old planter who has managed to make his children hate him as much as the slaves he abuses do; the question is not who has motive, but which of them is trying to kill him (and who will be first to succeed). The nice payoff for January is the solution to a riddle he'd been worrying over for several books: what happened to his father?

Die Upon a Kiss is concerned with the music scene in New Orleans, primarily, but also weaves in the often passionate politics of the day, including the international scene. And of course it has a uniquely New Orleans touch, once more reflecting on the bitter truths that all African-Americans of whatever percentage had to live with.

I don't know how accurate Hambly's portrayal is, of either the times or the people (since she is neither black nor male), but the books are interesting reading.

The Finder Series

by

Carla Speed McNeil

reviewed by Sarah-Wade Smith

Often when I try out some of my RPG stuff or alternative comics on my mundane friends, I get the comment that they are way too complicated to understand. This series of graphic novels is complicated enough that sometimes even I had trouble following it. I suspect that the artist/author Carla Speed McNeil understands this, since she includes numerous and very informative footnotes in these collections of her *Finder* series.

So, why am I reviewing comic books in a science-fiction newsletter? I think these books do qualify as SF because of the incredibly detailed and fairly consistent world McNeil has built.

Finder takes place in a far future world where the garbled scraps of twentieth century history are recycled as pop culture. It is a dystopian future where the landscape is dominated by ancient domed cities, while the spaces between the cities are a wilderness roamed by lower-tech nomads not all of them human. Although the inhabitants of the cities drive cars, watch TV and use cyberpunk neural jacks, the technology that built the domes has long been lost and the domes themselves seem to be failing. Pieces of the dome over the city of Anvard occasionally crack off and fall; something the inhabitants prefer to ignore since they cannot prevent or repair it.



Notes from the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Column - David Brody

“WHEN that Aprilis, with his showers swoot,
The drought of March hath pierced to the root,
And bathed every vein in such licour....”

from *The Canturbury Tales*

by Geoffrey Chaucer

As I write this, the rain is drenching my garden, the perennials are inching skyward and the Earth is waking up – literally. This wobbly spinning home of ours is alive in ways that no science or technology will ever unravel. I call it magic. And I believe that magic trumps science anytime. The first crocus or daffodil proves that to me each summer.

Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* is the finest example I've read of a book about a living planet. The best thing about it (aside from the remarkably vivid descriptive passages) is that *Solaris* remains unknowable. It's secrets can't be unraveled and shouldn't be. The planet's beauty and power and strange wisdom are all that the reader needs to know. The characters that try too hard to understand it find nothing and lose themselves instead. Of course, as you know, Lem's translator, Michael Kandel, will be this year's Confluence GoH, so he can dismiss my ramblings as nonsense in person.

In this issue, Sarah Wade-Smith reviews the *Finder* series of graphic novels, Ann Cecil deviates slightly from SF & F with her review of Barbara Hambly's Benjamin January series, and Peter Knapp of Lambda Sci-Fi, the Washington, DC area gay Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror club reviews Russell T. Davies' new Dr. Who novel. Davies is the man behind the Doctor's upcoming return to the BBC. For a devoted Whovian like myself, 2005 will be a big year

Also, Randy Hoffman responds to my editorial in last month's issue. While I was tempted to engage in a line by line refutation of Randy's letter, (it would have been easy) but fairness dictated that his opinions be allowed to stand alone. I was also concerned that we might fall into a point/counterpoint bottomless pit. I understood when I injected my political opinions into Sigma's pages, that it was outside the strict bounds of the publication's presumed mission, but in my year as a member of Parsec I don't recall a formal or informal meeting of members that did not include at least one political conversation and I would like to think that Sigma can reflect the concerns of the Parsec membership no matter where that leads.

Let me know how you feel on the subject. E-mail me at sigma@spellcaster.org or dbrody@mindspring.com. In the end, however, I reserve the right to put any opinion on any subject that I choose on this one page or I'm just not interested.

Letter to the Editor

In your editorial in the April SIGMA, you stated, “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 honored tradition in American politics), but dispense with it completely. Of course, this is all about creating fear.” You went on to state, “Fear makes us support wars that do nothing but destroy and kill,” and “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.”

I am not a Republican; I am proud to be an independent. However, I *am* one of those apparently rare conservative fen, and I’m getting very, very tired of the absolutely constant Bush-administration-bashing drone appearing in fannish communication, especially when it consists entirely of vague and unsubstantiated charges and when it appears completely out of context. If you were doing an editorial about a meeting with a political topic, or for a SIGMA that for whatever reason had a lot of political content, your divisive and emotionally charged political comments might have the excuse of being relevant. In this case they were not, and in the future I’d ask you to reserve them for more appropriate forums (or rather, fora).

As for the comments themselves: First, you accuse members of the government of airing ads that are not merely distortions but are 100% untrue, and therefore complete fabrications. Which members of government? Which ads? Airing when? If these advertisements are demonstrably outright lies, as you claim, why has no one been sued for slander or libel, or at least sued or publicly pressured media outlets not to air them?

Second, you seem to be saying that the war in Iraq has accomplished nothing but destruction and killing. So deposing Saddam was not an accomplishment? Shutting down his political prisons and freeing his prisoners was not an accomplishment? Restoring basic freedoms and even a little of Iraq’s infrastructure after 35 years of despotism, mismanagement, and neglect were not accomplishments? I guess our soldiers ought to be told they haven’t done anything in Iraq but a lot of killing and destruction; they might not be aware of that.

Third, you state that our government lied to us about the threat from Iraq. It’s very fashionable these days to blithely and nonspecifically accuse people of lying, even about decisions that mean life or death to thousands of others. I believe that our government might have made statements about Iraq prior to the war which were mistaken or uninformed, perhaps very sadly so; but which of the government’s statements can be proven to be deliberate lies? Please cite for me instances in which members of our government can be *shown* to have made a statement about Iraq prior to the war that they *knew* was untrue. If you can do so, why haven’t you already contacted your Senators and Congressional representatives to demand that they initiate impeachment proceedings immediately?



Books

The Benjamin January Series

by

Barbara Hambly

reviewed by Ann Cecil

Lately I’ve been reading a series of books by Barbara Hambly, who has written her fair share of SF and Fantasy (most notably *The Time of the Dark* and *The Bride of the Rat God*). The books in question are technically mysteries, set in the 1830s in New Orleans. The gimmick is that the detective hero is a Free Man of Color, a term that meant something quite specific in New Orleans then. The books are a set of studies in the culture of the time and place, as well as an attempt to explore just what it is was like to be black in America at that time.

I liked the hero: Benjamin January (also referred to as Ben Janvier, in French) is an engaging, thoughtful, and reasonable hero. Hambly uses a clever device: January was born a slave on a plantation; at 8 was freed when his mother was bought by a white planter and became his mistress. As a freed child, he got an education and a chance to develop his talents for music. At 22 January took off for Paris, where he became a surgeon, married a white woman, and for 16 years lived as an equal with other men. His wife’s tragic death has sent him back to New Orleans, but the length of time away allows his character to believably express a perspective matching the reader’s: he finds much of the ‘custom of the country’ strange and hard to bear.

His chief advantages are his innate decency and his willingness to get involved where by rights and the times he should have looked the other way. One of the more charming features of this series is that the books have continuity, with a definite time frame. Things that happened in one book continue to affect the hero in the next; things he learned from one experience don’t just get dropped, tv-like.

I only read five, though I believe there are more (I may go look them up).

A Free Man of Color explores the society and in particular the tangled web of intrigue and responsibility between white men, their white wives, and their colored mistresses. We get an introduction to January’s mother and two sisters, as well as a glimpse of the miserable time a woman could have in that era.

Fever Season graphically illustrates what passed for medicine in those days and times. One of the less popularized facts about New Orleans is that it is hot in the summer. In 1830, with no garbage collection, pools of stagnant water and mosquitos everywhere, summer in New Orleans meant yellow fever and often outbreaks of cholera. Interestingly, the whites had a higher death toll. Along with the requisite mystery and the appalling medical sections, we get the beginnings of a romance.

no work permits, ID papers, fixed address, while having an ethical problem with accepting money in payment for work.

Does this begin to give an idea of the complexity and richness of the storyline?

In the sequel, *King of Cats*, McNeil manages to come up with a simple but still intriguing plot. Jaeger, en route to somewhere else, finds himself at Munkylan, an amusement park city in the middle of nowhere. By coincidence, the town is also hosting groups of his people, the Ascians, who have come there at the urgings of Chief Coward to negotiate a treaty with the Nyima lion people.

Why Munkytown? It was the only neutral ground all parties would agree on. However, the rulers of the city have misunderstood the request for hospitality and has put on displays of their “primitive” culture for the tourists. This is resented but understood by the Ascians and reluctantly complied with. The Nyima do not understand it and are refusing to compromise their dignity by performing, which has a group of them led by the King’s heir Maricch almost besieged in the town.

Now however, Kokutsolado, the Nyima king has died and Maricch must escape from the town to undertake the all important task of selecting the next king. When Jaeger wanders into the Nyima camp, he is mistaken for a human mourning the death of the Nyima king, and is recruited to bring Maricch and her sisters out. This in turn brings him into contact with the wily Chief Coward and his folks. Coward is going to manipulate everybody around him into getting his peace treaty.

And then there are the Munkylan folks. They think they are running the park. Jaeger can’t get a job with them since he doesn’t fit in. (If nothing else, he has weird looking yellow eyes.) He doesn’t have the money to register as a guest and if he gets caught inside the park without being one or the other, he’s in trouble.

Finally, add in a treasure of Nyiman gold and enjoy the ride.

Like I said, Jaeger’s world can be a very difficult one to follow, but I found the effort worth the ride.

Doctor Who: The New Adventures: Damaged Goods

by

Russell T Davies

reviewed by Peter Knapp

I’m a big fan of the British science fiction TV series *Doctor Who*. I have avidly collected and read the novelizations of the broadcast stories. When original novels began to appear on bookstore shelves, I collected them and read several before concluding I didn’t care for these original stories. Recently I found out that Russell T. Davies, creator of *Queer as Folk* (the original British version) and producer of the new *Doctor Who* series (currently in pre-production), wrote an original adventure with gay content in it. I was intrigued.

A quick primer for those not familiar with the show: *Doctor Who* is about a mysterious humanoid alien on the run from his people in a stolen time-and-space machine. He almost always travels with a companion or two and does everything possible to defeat evil wherever he finds it. The show originally aired on the BBC in the United Kingdom from 1963 to 1989, with one made-for-television movie in 1996.

Damaged Goods features the seventh Doctor (eight actors have played the role on TV) and two companions (Chris and Roz) original to the book series. They all arrive at a London housing project in 1987, where unspeakable evil has literally risen from the grave. The local drug dealer, who has recently committed suicide by self-immolation, rises from his grave and steals the body of a John who has just stabbed his trick, an older closeted widower from the projects named Harold. Harold escapes with his life but won’t tell anyone what has happened or that he needs medical attention. His very openly gay flatmate, David, knows something’s wrong but can’t get Harold to talk.

Harold is not the only one with secrets. It turns out that most of the residents of the project have seen and/or done things that they don’t want to talk about. This hinders the Doctor’s efforts to uncover the truth about what is happening and how to put an end to it.

Whenever I read a TV tie-in, I try to think about how well the book fits into the source material and how well the book stands on its own. I think *Damaged Goods* succeeds on both levels. For *Doctor Who* fans, the author does a very good job of capturing the personality of the seventh Doctor. There are many references to both the TV series and the original novels that are integral to the story. At the same time, the tale can read as an independent book. Because this is a horrific story, an appreciation for the horror genre is recommended.

In some TV tie-ins, a character’s homosexuality doesn’t tie into the story and often feels forced. In *Damaged Goods*, Russell Davies successfully weaves Harold’s and David’s sexuality into the story. Harold’s closeted nature fits right in with the behavior of his neighbors, who all harbor secrets. When the Doctor asks his companion Chris to get some tainted cocaine that the resurrected drug dealer has been selling, Chris asks David to take him clubbing. David is happy to oblige, as he has a big crush on Chris. To David’s dismay, he finds out that Chris is straight, but he convinces Chris that it’s important to try things at least once.

While reading *Damaged Goods*, I realized why I don’t care for the original *Doctor Who* novelizations that I’ve read. While the show almost always takes place from the point of view of the Doctor and his companions, the point of view in the original novels (including this one) centers around the “guest cast.” I had trouble developing any empathy for characters introduced in this story who would most likely not appear in a later book and would most likely end up dead by the end of the tale.

I think *Damaged Goods* is a decent read. Fans of both Doctor Who and hor-



April Minutes

PARSEC met at the East Liberty branch of the Carnegie Free Library on April 10, 2004. While the library is free, parking is very much not free. Several members were very upset to discover that the as-reported increase in parking fees has reached the meters in the lots around the library.

You now get 15 minutes for each quarter. And there are no bargain meters to be found. Fortunately the library is still willing to make change, since the change machines are in the same not-working condition.

Diane McCarty successfully executed a barter for dues and became a member. The raffle was won by David Brody; PARSEC made \$22.

Geis brought the meeting to order, and started the announcements with the news that TRFN (Three Rivers Free Net), our free host for our website, is going under Real Soon Now (their equipment is dying). We need to find another host; if members know of any good deals, contact Geis. Yahoo has a hosting service at \$15/month, but it is Yahoo (the mother of spam). We take up only about 10 mg now, so we should be able to find something reasonably cheap.

The 501c3 meeting report was given by Ann Cecil and Kevin Hayes, who talked about the proposals for a new structure with standing committees for each separate group (e.g., Confluence, Alpha, etc.). Next meeting will be at Ann's house April 26.

Dan Bloch presented a survey of the History of Tall Buildings, from early pyramids up to the present. He started by giving us some enlightening definitions: man-made tall things come in several classes. The tallest man-made structure on Earth is a TV antenna near Fargo, North Dakota: it is an impressive 2063 feet tall. We now have an FAA regulation that says you can't build any TV antennas taller than that.

There is a Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitats, out of Lehigh, Pennsylvania, that defines whether a structure is a building (as versus a tall structure like an antenna). The key feature has to do with having floors. For instance, the CN Tower in Toronto is a very tall free-standing structure but it is not officially a building because it doesn't have floors near the top.

For those who watched Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta-Jones in that movie, and looked at the scenery, yes, the Petronis Tower in Kuala Lumpur is the winner as the tallest building currently. For some contrast, the Great Pyramid, built by the Egyptians using some techniques we are not completely sure of, is 481 feet high. One of Dan's most interesting digressions was the comment that because of the Earth's shifting, the Great Pyramid is now 2 1/2 miles south of where it was originally built.

Dan illustrated, both with gestures and with printouts, the progression of buildings, as people slowly but surely began building taller and taller structures. He also talked about the architectural underpinnings necessary, and why we suddenly made the jump in the last century to taller and taller structures (steel, of course).

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Underneath the dome's eternal 24/7 soft glow, people live in a city dominated by a dozen clans, each of which controls one sector of the economy and whose members are bred to all show a strong "family resemblance". Citizenship goes with clan membership. Non-clan members are definitely second class citizens-at best!

Into this city comes the "Finder" of the title, Jaeger Ayers. The Finders are an elite, secret order of tribal trackers, scouts and sometimes detectives who are expected to serve the common good selflessly and anonymously. Ayers is a man of mixed ethnicity raised among the tribal Ascian people, who barely tolerated him as a "sin-eater" who ritually cleanses the dead of their sins by taking them and their punishment into himself.

After taking a beating that should have killed him, but didn't (he seems to possess the healing abilities of a werewolf), Ayers was initiated into the Finders by a tribal elder. Part of his problem is that as a Finder, he's supposedly a revered servant of the tribe, but he is forbidden to let anyone know this. As a sin-eater, he's a pariah, two steps below poor white trash. Among his own people he's usually treated like dirt. Among outsiders, he's an eternal stranger and exile.

Like most country boys, Jaeger hates cities. They are too crowded and the overloaded air filtration systems make them literally stink. When in a domed city, he chain smokes to try to kill the smell.

In Sin-Eater, part one of the series, Jaeger is visiting Anvard to see Emma Lockhart Grosvenor and her kids. Emma is the ex-wife of Brigman, Jaeger's old CO when he was in Anvard's army. Jaeger is more than a little in love with Emma and Emma's oldest daughter Rachel has a serious crush on Jaeger. Her youngest Marcie adores him, and Lynne, the middle child doesn't trust him a bit.

Thing is, Jaeger has been keeping tabs on the family for the jailed Brigman. However, now he is out of jail and, in his own twisted mind, trying to unite with his family again. Emma and the kids are terrified of him but unaware that he is out. Jaeger is playing both sides, trying to keep Brig out of trouble and from finding his family. This includes setting up a fake apartment furnished with Emma's castoffs for Brigman to find.

Add to this the fact that Emma is trying to keep her freelance gardening business afloat despite Marcie's medical bills, coping with raising three kids, and dealing with being disowned by her own clan for marrying a member of another clan. She spends hours spaced out in an imaginary world so detailed it has its own language.

Then there is Rachel who is going through a boy-crazy stage, and not looking forward to trying to get into her mother's clan which she despises. Lynne, her brother, is also dreading puberty. Although raised as a Medawar, he has no acceptance with them, and resembles his mother's clan. This is terrifying because Llaverac men all look very much like woman. His mother, raised in a clan of all "women" sees this as sort of normal. Lynne emphatically doesn't.

And finally there is Jaeger trying to make his way in the city despite having